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“Mr. Siksek” from the Palestinian diary of St. Grigol Peradze and his unknown Georgian ancestor

In 1936 when St. Grigol Peradze was in Jerusalem he met a resident of Jerusalem – someone “Mr. Siksek”. He turned out to be a George Siksek, a well-known person in the Christian community of Palestine who held various positions in the period of the British Mandate. The paper explores the oral tradition of the Siksek family. According to the narrative the ancestor of the Sikseks was Simon, an envoy and a secretary sent by the Georgian king to Jerusalem to help the Cross Monastery in the 14th century. The Cross Monastery Agapes No. 84/81, 65/63, 206/203 dating back to the 14th century mention Svimon Elmelikisdze. In two cases he is mentioned as the abbot of the Cross Monastery and in one case as a secular assistant of the abbot. Based on the chronology and other crucial details the author of this paper concludes that Simon, the ancestor of the Sikseks is the same person as Svimon Elmelikisdze mentioned in the Cross Monastery Agapes. The author believes that the Sikseks’ narrative is true and verifies it with the data of historic sources.

Keywords: Grigol Peradze, George Siksek, Jerusalem, Monastery of the Cross, Simeon Elmelikisdze

The diary of St. Grigol (Gregory) Peradze “Roses of Jericho” was written in Polish and it became available to Georgian readers rather late, only in 2016. The diary was published in the Polish periodicals in the late 1930s. The data was collected and published in the „Pro Georgia. Journal of Kartvelological Studies” (editor: David Kolbaia) of Warsaw university in 2005. Henryk Paprocki published the full text of the diary with the comments in Polish. In 2012, the full text of the diary was included in Volume 3 of St. Grigol Peradze’s works (editor: Henryk Paprocki). The full text of the diary was translated to English as well and then to Georgian from English (*Peradze, 2016. P. 207*).

The diary describes St. Grigol Peradze’s travels in the Holy Land in the period of July 5-September 28, 1936. Along with the other interesting episodes it tells us of Grigol Peradze’s meeting with a Christian Jerusalemite. The first meeting was in the morning of July 28, 1936. Grigol Peradze writes,

“An Arab came to me and told me his name was Siksek and he was Georgian by origin. His ancestor came to Jerusalem five or six hundred years ago as a secretary in the Georgian king’s suite. His name was Simon but his family name was unknown and he was called Siksek (the word describing his position, i.e. a secretary) . . . The Arab’s father had a rich library, including the documents dated back to the afore-mentioned period, but his mother sold it after her husband’s death. However, he still had an Arabic manuscript describing the locations of the Georgian monasteries in the Holy Land” (*Peradze, 2016. P. 120*).

Father Grigol met the Arab twice after that. The second time he saw the man with Archimandrite Narcissus that evening. Grigol calls him the inspector of Orthodox Christian schools in Transjordan (*Peradze, 2016. P. 122*). The third and last meeting happened on August 26. Grigol writes,

“On my way home I met Mr. Siksek, who I had not seen for a while. He told me that a stone with the Georgian inscription was discovered during the construction of a villa in the vicinity of the Monastery of Cross. He promised to tell about this discovery in detail and then asked me something . . . He told me that his Georgian ancestor was buried in the Georgian cemetery in Katamon and the grave had an inscription with his name and family name” (*Peradze, 2016. P. 161*).

The next day Father Grigol really visited Katamon but could not find the tombstone described by Mr. Siksek. The diary does not tell us if they met again. On August 29, 1936 father Grigol left Palestine and headed for Syria.

Who was “Mr. Siksek” from Jerusalem

The diary of St. Grigol Peradze does not mention the first name or age of Mr. Siksek. The fact that father Grigol refers to him as “Mr. Siksek” probably means that he was a middle-aged man or quite well-known locally. The diary also shows that Mr. Siksek was connected with the Orthodox Christian Patriarchate of Jerusalem and its educational facilities in Palestine and Jordan. Another useful detail for identifying the person is the name of his ancestor “Simon”. Some of his descendants were most likely given this name. During father Grigol’s trip Palestine was under the British Mandate. Therefore, we started the search in the photo archives of the British Mandate period and we were lucky.

In view of the details mentioned above we established that Mr. Siksek, the acquaintance of father Grigol was George Siksek from Jerusalem. With the help of an old friend of the Siksek family, Ms. Mona Hajjar Halaby, we soon got in touch with the granddaughter of George Siksek, Ms. Randa Siksek living in Greece. The Siksek family members knew nothing about Grigol Peradze. However, the granddaughter easily identified her grandfather, George Siksek, in Grigol Peradze’s diary. The very first letter of this lady shows her excitement about our interest. “My grandfather was so keen on researching his Georgian roots, he was so enthusiastic about this issue that he would have certainly met you if he were alive today”, she wrote to us from Athens. Based on the data she provided we would like to present the biography of Mr. Siksek.

George Siksek was born on July 12, 1887 in his ancestors’ house in the Christian Quarter of the old city of Jerusalem. His father died when he was not yet three years old. George had a sister Hilaneh. George went to the Greek Orthodox Christian primary school and then to St. Demetrius School which he finished

with distinction in 1905. The same year he started working in the Orthodox Christian school of Ramle. Then he taught Arabic in the secondary school of the Patriarchate in Jerusalem. In 1909-1914 George worked in the Printing House of the Holy Sepulchre Church as an inspector of the Arabic prints. On November 7, 1910, 23 year old George married a sixteen-year-old Katherine, the daughter of George Hanania, owner of the Al-Quds Newspaper and Printing House. They had three children Hanna (John), Henriette and Simon. In 1919, George became a member of the Higher Educational Governmental Committee in Jerusalem. In 1921 he was a Consulting Member at the Inspecting Committee that was created and presided over by the Head of the Ceylon Judges, Sir Anton Birtram. The next year he was appointed as General Inspector for the Greek Orthodox Schools of the Greek Patriarchate, in Palestine and Jordan. They were a total of 32 schools. In 1926, George became a member of the Electoral Committee in the Municipality of Jerusalem. In 1931 he was elected as honorable Judge at the Municipal Court in Jerusalem. He was appointed to this post by the resolution of the British High Commissioner, Sir Herbert Samuel. He remained in this position for eight years, until the courts were closed down. In November of 1948, George Siksek was appointed as Arab Secretary to His Beatitude the Patriarch of Jerusalem.

George Siksek wrote mostly in Arabic and had quite a large number of readers. He translated the Byzantine family law from the old Greek to Arabic. Since 1930 this translation has been published five times. He also translated 695-page book of Greek Orthodox prayers, which was published twice in 1914 and 1940. In addition to his native Arabic, George Siksek also knew Greek, English, French and Turkish. He was awarded the Cross of the Holy Sepulchre, in recognition of his dedicating fifty years to the field of education; Two badges of recognition from the Patriarchate of Jerusalem, as well as honor awards by the governments of Lebanon and Greece. The walls of the Sikseks' cosy house in Jerusalem are covered with George's paintings. As a book lover he also had a rich library. George Siksek died at the age of 84 on the 18 June, 1971. He was buried in the Greek orthodox cemetery in Jerusalem, where his father and grandfather, as well as his wife, elder son and daughter are also buried.

George Siksek's wife Katherine Hanania (1894–1973) supported the establishing of the first nursing home in Palestine, maternity hospital, orphanages, shelters for the sick, young and unwed mothers' homes in Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Beit Sahur and Beit Jala. In 1961 she established "Four Homes of Mercy" (FHOM) in Bethany. Her daughter Henrietta Siksek headed these charities after her death. The elder son of George and Katherine Siksek John (1913–1986) was a lawyer and a younger son Simon (1923–1989) – a law and economics expert. Their sister Henrietta Siksek-Farraaj (1918–2014) in addition to charity was also involved in teaching, journalism, writing. She was a children's' writer and an author of radio programs. All three children of George Siksek were educated in the leading universities of West Europe (USA, Great Britain).

The Labyrinth of the Siksek's Family Traditions

Why did "Mr. Siskek" so persistently search for the Georgian roots of his family? What information did he have about the Georgian origin of his distant ancestor? Only George Siksek himself could have given us the accurate answers to these questions. It seems that Henrietta Siksek-Farraaj who died in 2014 at the age of 96 knew a lot about this.

The Siksek family had a long line of clerics. The family tradition has it that in 1643 one of their ancestors was a priest in Jvari Monastery. George’s father Hanna Il Khuri Siksek (1834–1889) and grandfather Jirji Il Khuri Siksek were also priests. George never met his grandfather and was very young when his father died. However, according to his ancestors George learned about his Georgian origin from his father’s and grandfather’s writings. We do not know what documents were kept in the family before George’s father died. After his death, George’s mother Latifeh Hanna Nakhle’ had to sell the family library to make ends meet.

George Siksek told Grigol Peradze about an Arabic manuscript kept in his family. According to his words, the manuscript described the Georgian monasteries in Jerusalem. First of all, we asked about this document. Randa Siksek gave us her grandfather’s manuscript in addition to the other data. The title of the document is “A Word about the Siksek family”. The text says that this story was recorded in late April in 1912 in Jerusalem by George Siksek, the only son of Priest Hanna Il Khuri Siksek. The text shows that George Siksek also used some documents in researching his Georgian ancestry. According to Randa Siksek one of the sources he used was the data published in the Patriarchate’s newspaper *Nea Zion* in 1905 (*Nea Zion, 1905 P. 653*). It is noteworthy that St. Grigol Peradze also used one of the issues of this newspaper (*Nea Zion, 1910. P. 132-134; Peradze, 1937. P. 188*). After separating this data from the text, we get the original information kept in the family. The extract below is the translation of George Siksek’s manuscript.

“The Sikseks are descendants of a Georgian nobleman who settled in Jerusalem 600 years ago in about the 1300s. He was a “sekretarios” (secretary), which also means a writer. The natives could not pronounce such a long word and they changed and repeated the first sounds “Sek”. That is how the word “Siksek” was derived. The name of this sekretarios was Simon (Samaan in Arabic). He was the founder of the family. He arrived in Jerusalem from Georgia. He was the Georgian King’s secretary and an authorized person. The Georgians owned a lot of monasteries around Jerusalem, including Golgotha Monastery as well as Cross Monastery (Al Musallabe), St. Jacob’s Monastery, which is now the Armenian Patriarchate, St. John’s Monastery (now the Franciscan Monastery), St. Demetrious’ Monastery and St. Catherine’s Monastery. During the reign of Mameluke Sultan Al-Nasir ibn Qalawun (1293–1341) the villagers occupied the Cross monastery and wanted to convert it into a mosque. They drove the Georgian monks out of the Monastery. The Georgian king and the Byzantine Emperor Andronicus II Palaeologus (1281-1333) sent a joint mission headed by Simon Sekretarios to Sultan Al-Nasir to ask him to return the monastery to the Georgians. In 1305, Simon with his wife Tamar and their two sons Joseph and John arrived in Jerusalem from the north of Georgia. He had the documents and was instructed by the Georgian king to return it to the Georgians. After getting the Cross Monastery back Simon stayed there with his wife and sons. He helped the abbot with the administrative affairs and took care of the Georgian peasants living around the monastery. There were about 1000 Georgian peasants in the villages of Malha and Katamon. The descendants of Simon stayed in the Monastery, north of St. Barbara’s Church for about a century”.

The Georgian chronicler Zhamtaaghmcereli, the Chronicles “Dzegli Eristavta”, Vakhushti Bagrationi and Arabic sources (Al-Qalqashandi, Al-Muibbi, Al-Ma-

qrizi, Badr al-Din Al-Ayni, Mujir al-Din al-'Ulaymi, Abu'l-Fadl) tell us about the occupation of the Cross Monastery by the Muslims, turning it into a mosque and the struggle of the Georgians to take it back. According to the Arab chroniclers the Muslims took the Cross Monastery away from the Georgians under Sultan Baybars al-Bunduqdāri/Abu al-Futuh (1260–1277) and the Georgians took it back under Sultan Al-Nasir ibn Qalawun (1293–1294, 1299–1309, 1310–1341). There are no doubts about the identity of the Byzantine Emperor, he is Andronicus II Palaeologus (1282–1328).

There were several negotiations with the sultan of Egypt and the return of the Cross monastery took quite a long time (*Tiesenhausen, 1886. P. 212–213*). In addition to missions sent in 1305 and 1310, George VI the Minor and George V the Brilliant of Georgia later sent missions in 1316 and 1320. Jvari Monastery was captured and returned several times (*Kiknadze, 1989 P. 63*). According to Al-Maqrizi in 1305

“The envoys from the Emperor of Constantinople together with the Georgian king’s envoys arrived with gifts and a letter asking to open the Cross Monastery for the Georgians to see it. The Georgians promised to obey the Sultan and help him if necessary. An order was issued to open the monastery and it was opened. The envoys left with the appropriate answer” (*Gocholeishvili, 1988. P. 3*).

According to Al-Mufad-Dal in 1310, the ambassadors of Al Lashkar (Laskar) accompanied by the Georgian envoys visited the court of the Sultan to ask him to return the Cross Monastery. The Monastery was turned into a mosque by Sheikh Khidr al-Futuh (*Gocholeishvili, 1988. P. 3*). According to Agape (love feast) No 295/288 King David VIII (1293–1311) saved the monastery. In Agape he is called the second builder of the monastery who returned the monastery and the church that was turned into a mosque to the Georgians (*Metreveli, 1962. P. 43, 106*). Some scholars date this event to 1305 (*Metreveli, 1962. P. 43, 106; Ingoroqva, 1963. P. 748–751*) and some – to 1310 (*Gocholeishvili, 1977. P. 265–267; Kiknadze, 1989. P. 43; Japaridze, 2006. P. 289–306*).

It seems that the documents used by George Siksek date the mission (or the return of the Cross Monastery) to 1305. This date is found only in the works of Al-Maqrizi (1364–1442) and Mujir al-Din al-'Ulaymi (1456–1522). George Siksek determined the date of his ancestors’ arrival in Jerusalem to the best of his abilities and he was quite accurate as we can see below.

Original Sources of the Siksek Family Tradition

Whether or not George Siksek used the afore-mentioned data on the Georgian envoys, his family tradition includes some details, which were never described by the Arab chroniclers mentioned above. These details are as follows: 1. The names of the Georgian king’s envoy and his family members (Simon, Tamar, Joseph and John); 2. Simon’s origin from northern Georgia; 3. Simon’s settling in Jerusalem with his family; 4. Simon’s support to the abbot of the Cross Monastery; 5. Simon’s assistance to the Georgian peasants living around the Cross Monastery; 6. The data about St. Barbara’s church in the Cross Monastery. George Siksek could not just make up these details. They were part of his family’s narrative.

Although there is no St. Barbara’s church in Jerusalem, but St. Barbara’s Chapel is in the former Georgian Monastery of St. Nicholas. Besides, in 1483–1484,

the Dominican theologian Felix Fabri and Count Philipp Ludwig von Hanik saw the Saint’s relics there. In von Hanik’s words “the Monastery belongs to the Georgians. You can see St. Barbara’s hand here” (*Peradze, 1992. P. 67*). Therefore, the Siksek family tradition was probably right and there was St. Barbara’s Chapel in the Monastery area.

The Sikseks remember the exact time their family settled in the Christian neighborhood of Jerusalem. According to the researcher Mona Hajjar Halaby Henriette Siksek often mentioned 1432 as the date when the Sikseks settled in their house in Jerusalem. According to the family tradition the descendants of Simon Sekretarios lived in the Cross Monastery for a century. Felix Fabri mentioned that the Georgian monks lived with their wives in Cross monastery and this data leads us to believe George Siksek.

The ancestor of the Sikseks arrived in Jerusalem at the time when the Cross Monastery was in the Muslims’ hands. After the return of the monastery, he stayed there and actively assisted the Abbot in the Monastery management. The Georgian kings sent several missions to the Sultan of Egypt in the first twenty years of the 14th century but we only know the names of Pipa Kveni-pneveli, who headed the mission in 1320 and Priest Ioane Bandaisdze accompanying him. Before that at least three other missions had been sent, but we do not know the names.

The register of Agapes of the Cross Monastery shows the great efforts of the Georgian kings and noblemen to free this Monastery. George Siksek did not know Georgian and could not use these documents in his research. However, the stories passed down in the Siksek family about Simon’s ancestors living in the monastery and one of the ancestors serving as a priest in 1643, prove that the Sikseks preserved their native language for quite a long time. They could even have written the stories down. When the following generations forgot Georgian these stories were passed down as an oral tradition. By the way, Timote Gabashvili who visited Jerusalem in 1758 mentioned that among the local Arabs there were a lot of Georgians who had forgotten their language (*Gabashvili, 1983. P. 539*).

The Identity of Simon Siksek in the Context of Cross Monastery Agapes

According to the Siksek family tradition their ancestor arrived in Jerusalem in connection with the return of the Cross Monastery to the Georgians. The register of Agapes includes the events from the capture of the Cross Monastery to its return to the Georgians. It shows that in the period from 1273 to 1320 all the Georgian kings strove to free the Monastery. The Agapes mention the kings of Georgia, namely Demetrius II the Devoted (1259–1289), David VIII (1293–1311), Vakhtang III (1298/99 and 1302–1308), George V the Brilliant (1299–1302 and 1318–1346), George VI the Minor (1308–1313 and 1314–1318), Constantine I (1293–1327). It is a well-known fact that due to the intrigues of the Mongols the descendants of King Demetrius II sometimes reigned simultaneously in East Georgia.

According to the Agapes of the Cross Monastery the identities and sequence of the Monastery abbots was determined (*Metreveli, 1962. P. 51; Ingoroqva, 1963. P. 702*). There are only two people named Simon (Svimeon, Svimon) among the “Jvaris mama” (the Monastery Abbot) in the period under discussion. They

are Svimon (or Svimeon) Elmelikisdze and Simona Tsidashvili. The former can be the ancestor of the Sikseks. According to the family tradition he was a nobleman from the north of Georgia and stayed in Jerusalem before and after the return of the Monastery to the Georgians. The tradition also mentions that Simon was an assistant of the Monastery Abbot. The period of Svimon Elmelikisdze's stay in Jerusalem in the first quarter of the 14th century (*Metreveli, 1962. P. 51; Ingoroqva, 1963. P. 702, 767*). His name is mentioned in Agapes No 84/81, 65/63, 206/203. All three of these Agapes contain important information on the issue.

Agape No 84/81 was established after Svimon's death. Svimon Elmelikisdze was "Jvaris mama" in the first period of George V-s reign when the Monastery reclaimed its status as the center of the Georgian colony in Jerusalem. Svimon was respected by the heads of the Monastery as he is referred to as "Saint Father" in the Agape. The word "Saint" is only used for Prokhore Shavteli (the founder of the Monastery) and Luka Mukhaisdze (a martyr killed when the Monastery was occupied) (*Ingoroqva, 1963. P. 767*).

Agape no 65/63 was jointly established by Svimon Elmelikisdze, who was the abbot of the Cross Monastery ("Jvaris mama"), a priest of the church of Resurrection, the archpriest and the order of the Georgian monks in Jerusalem to commemorate the generous support provided to the monastery by Rusudan daughter of Demetrius II and her husband Taqa Fanaskerteli. It seems that Svimon Elmelikisdze was the head of the Georgian colony (he is the only one whose name the Agape mentions). Although the Agape was entered in the register after freeing the Monastery, but the facts it mentions happened when the Monastery was in the Muslims' hands and the Georgian monks took refuge in a town church (*Ingoroqva, 1963. P. 753*).

Agape No 206/203 mentions king Vakhtang III (1297–1299 and 1302–1308) and his wife, who became a nun. The Agape was written after the death of Vakhtang and the freeing of the Cross Monastery, but it tells a story of capturing the Monastery and helps us to identify the ancestor of the Siksek family. The Agape says that 26 years passed after capturing the Monastery. This is probably 1299/1300. In exactly that period from November 1299 to March 1300 Vakhtang was in the army of Mahmud Ghazan (Ghazan Khan, Mongol ruler of Persia in 1295–1304) and participated in the battles against the Egyptian Mamelukes in Syria and Palestine. The army of Mahmud Ghazan took both Damascus and Jerusalem (*Цагарели, 1888 C. 53–54; Zhamtaaghmtsereli, 1987. P. 210*). According to one of the assumptions the Cross monastery was temporarily returned to the Georgians and Vakhtang made a donation to the Monastery (*Metreveli, 1962. P. 42; Ingoroqva, 1963. P. 750*). This may be true. However, we can also assume that in 1298 during Vakhtang's reign a mission was sent from Georgia to the Sultan. Mahmud Ghazan put Vakhtang III on the throne in November of 1297 instead of his deposed elder brother David VIII (*Zhamtaaghmtsereli, 1987. P. 203; Kiknadze, 1989. P. 35–36; Ghvaberidze, 1986. P. 14–15*). The following year Vakhtang had his coins minted (*Ghvaberidze, 1986. P. 14–15*). According to the Agape Svimon Elmelikisdze was in Jerusalem at the end of the 13th and the beginning of the 14th centuries. He was in the town church and assisted Solomon, the Abbot of the Cross Monastery who took refuge in the town church. The agape also mentions that these two people used Vakhtang's donation for the Monastery. It is interesting that Svimon is mentioned in the Agape without any clerical rank. There is a surprising similarity between the data in the Agape and the Siksek family's narrative. In short, the ancestor of the Sikseks "Simon Secretarios" is most likely Svimon Elmelikisdze.

The surname Elmelikisdze is not mentioned in the Georgian chronicles. If it is not a surname but a patronymic then we should pay attention to the inscription made in the 15th century on Largvisi Gospel (13th century). The inscription says, “God intercede for Elmelik and Dedopali (Queen?) and their sons Giorgi and Datuna”. The inscription belongs to the dynasty of Ksani Eristavi (Dukes). Elmeliki mentioned in the inscription (the last quarter of the 14th century) can be even a descendant of Svimon’s father. If Svimon belonged to the dynasty of Ksani Dukes, it explains why the Siksek family tradition says that he was from the north of Georgia and a nobleman. The chronicles of the Ksani Eristavi “Dzegli Eristavta” gives us the names of direct heirs, e.g. out of Shalva Kvenifneveli’s 14 children only two are mentioned by name (*Meskhia*, 1954. P. 349). If we accept the assumption that Svimon Elmelikisdze was sent to Jerusalem by Vakhtang III, we should also mention that Shalva Kvenifneveli was one of the closest and most loyal companions of Vakhtang. It sounds logical that the king would send one of the representatives of Kvenifnevelis with an important mission to Jerusalem. Svimon must have been a close relative of Shalva Kvenifneveli. Later in 1320 King George V the Brilliant sent Pipa Kvenifneveli (son of Shalva) and the priest Ioane Bandaisdze as envoys to the Sultan of Egypt. We can assume that he took into consideration the previous experience of the Kvenifnevelis in this matter. It is also noteworthy that St. Barbara’s church was built in Kvenifnevi in the former residence site of the Eristavi.

Grigol Peradze and George Siksek never met after 1936. George Siksek did not know about the martyrdom of Grigol Peradze and Grigol never found out whose descendant he met in Jerusalem.

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«Господин Сиксек» из палестинского дневника святого Григола Перадзе и его неизвестный грузинский предок

В 1936 г., посещая Иерусалим, святой Григол Перадзе встретился с местным жителем, неким «господином Сиксеком». Им оказался исполняющий различные обязанности во время действия Британского мандата в Палестине и хорошо известный в христианском сообществе Георгий Сиксек. В статье рассматривается устная традиция рода Сиксеков. Согласно древнему преданию, предок Сиксеков Симон, эмиссар и секретарь некоего грузинского царя, в начале XIV в. был послан в Иерусалим с особым заданием – оказать помощь монастырю Святого Креста. В датированных началам XIV в. агапах № 84/81, 65/63, 206/203 из монастыря Святого Креста упоминается Свимон Елмеликидзе. Два упоминания говорят о нем как о настоятеле монастыря Святого Креста, а третье – как о помощнике настоятеля. Основываясь на хронологических и других важнейших деталях, автор этой статьи приходит к выводу, что предок Сиксеков Симон является тем же лицом, что и упомянутое в агапах монастыря Святого Креста священное лицо под именем Свимона Елмеликидзе. Автор статьи считает, что фамильное предание Сиксеков является подлинным, так как оно верифицируется с данными исторических источников.

Ключевые слова: Григол Перадзе, Георгий Сиксек, Иерусалим, монастырь Святого Креста, Симеон Елмеликидзе.